Seeking Democracy in Côte d'Ivoire:

OVERCOMING EXCLUSIONARY CITIZENSHIP

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Once a thriving economy in sub-Saharan Africa, Côte d'Ivoire has suffered from two decades of intermittent conflict. The country is home to more than 60 ethnic groups, which fit within several larger groups based on common linguistic, cultural and religious ties and that are concentrated in either the northern or southern region, creating a north-south political divide. Both before and after independence in 1960, the porous borders of colonial French West Africa plus Côte d'Ivoire's surging export-led economy led to an influx of migrants from other ex-colonies, particularly Burkina Faso and Mali, which are also home to some of the same groups.

During President Félix Houphouët-Boigny's authoritarian rule from 1960 to 1993, Côte d'Ivoire continued to thrive economically. While favouring his own ethnic group, the President integrated some members of other groups into leading institutions. For three decades his presidency provided political stability within a one-party state. In 1990, however, a movement for democracy and street protests launched a democratic transition and multiparty elections began. Houphouët-Boigny's death in 1993 opened several decades of political violence around rigged and contested elections as well as political rights.

In 1994 the government instituted a restrictive citizenship policy of *Ivoirité* that denied citizenship to many northerners. The citizenship, and therefore voting rights and access to employment in the government and military, of numerous northerners was not recognized because they lacked documents to prove their birth and that of their parents. The exclusionary notion of *Ivoirité* was widely understood as designed to block the victory of political parties representing northerners. If the 2007 Ouagadougou Peace Accord (ending the civil war that began in 2002) identified a solution to the citizenship controversy, neither political violence nor contestation over elections has ended.

In commissioning the Côte d'Ivoire change case, the Global Centre for Pluralism seeks to understand why and how ethnic, religious, and regional

differences became politicized in the process of democratic transition when multiparty elections were introduced. What conditions and factors led not only to the creation of political parties representing religious, ethnic and regional groups, but also to the rise of a particularly pernicious form of xenophobic political discourse around citizenship claims? Were opportunities missed to create a more civil and inclusive political process?

CASE NARRATIVE

Côte d'Ivoire's political and economic histories, both colonial and post-colonial, have shaped its diversity as well as the character of the state and its forms of governance. Challenges to pluralism are rooted in the country's complex colonial history under French rule, when the people of Côte d'Ivoire shared the porous borders and homelands of French West Africa. The period of benevolent authoritarian rule under Félix Houphouët-Boigny (1960–93) that followed independence rejected the early lure of pan-Africanism but continuing ties to France blunted development of an indigenous national identity. By the time the country's struggle for democracy began in 1990, Ivoirians were more defined by their divisions—north and south, Muslim and Christian, ethnic identities (big and small)—rather than by what might unite them.

For thirty years the authoritarian rule and one-party regime of Houphouët-Boigny fashioned political stability, for two reasons. First, his policies of economic liberalism, particularly until the 1980s, generated economic growth, bringing jobs in both the private and public sectors. Second, his strategy was to refrain from favouring his own ethnic group, the Baoulé, too much and to include representatives of other groups in positions of power as well as allowing immigrants – estimated to form 12% of the population – to settle, prosper and naturalize.

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A popular movement and protests forced a democratic transition in 1990, including the introduction of multiparty elections. Houphouët-Boigny's party won the 1990 election, but after his death in 1993 the country's leaders demonstrated little willingness to share power and privileges across the electoral divide between north and south and the ethnic and religious diversity this regional difference also reflected.

The doctrine of *Ivoirité* was a pernicious form of xenophobic political discourse introduced in 1994. Excluding many from citizenship, it functioned as a mechanism for political marginalization of ordinary Ivoirians and political leaders, mainly from the North. Access to citizenship is based on the principle of *jus sanguinis* such that one must be born in Côte d'Ivoire with at least one parent also born in Côte d'Ivoire. The principle of *jus sanguinis* was not in dispute but clashes arose over

the conditions the government set for acceptable documentation, and deteriorated into accusations of false claims and some legitimate claimants' inability to produce the necessary documents (given the poor conditions of records as well as some deliberate destruction of records). The effect was to deny voting rights and employment to many people living in or originating from the northern region.

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A leading northern politician, Alassane Ouattara wished to contest the 2000 presidential election but was accused of not meeting the citizenship requirement. The resulting controversy brought a military coup, a contested electoral victory for Laurent Gbagbo (president 2000-10), and the outbreak of civil war in 2002. The north-south regional division was profound during the civil war, when the rebel forces controlled the north and the government the south. The 2007 Ouagadougou Peace Accord brokered a creative resolution of the citizenship problem based on legal pragmatism and technology. It set a three-month window for judicial decisions on contested cases in local communities, when birth certificates or other documents were lacking, as well as use of biometric data and other instruments to ensure reliability and transparency. This creativity provides a pluralism model for other African countries where recognition of citizenship remains difficult.

The Peace Accord did not, however, resolve conflicts derived from a multiparty system tightly organized along ethnic, religious and regional divides, in which the winner of the presidential election also controls many key appointments. Political winners are able to favour their supporters – often members of their own ethnic and religious community – and exclude, even punish, supporters of the opposition. The Peace Accord included a temporary power-sharing arrangement, giving the presidency to Laurent Gbagbo and the prime minister's position to a representative of the northern opposition. The pact was scheduled to end with the 2010 election. However, Gbagbo refused to step down, despite UN observers determining he had lost the 2010 election. After his forcible removal by French and UN forces, violence broke out in which 3,000 people were killed and both southerners and northerners were accused of war crimes. Ouattara became president in May 2011, and the regional and ethnic conflict did not end. The President pursued a kind of "victors' justice" by selectively prosecuting southerners and particularly Gbagbo supporters for crimes committed during the civil war and after. These practices plus multiple signs of favoritism and violent protests indicate that Côte d'Ivoire's hopes for multiparty democracy remain unrealized. A major obstacle has been the lack of institutional redesign to address political marginalization. Perhaps the temporary power sharing tried between 2007-2010 should have been made permanent via the introduction of consociational rules for the highest offices, in order to promote pluralism in a country as diverse as Côte d'Ivoire.

THROUGH A PLURALISM LENS

The Global Centre for Pluralism asked each author in the Change Case series to reflect on the sources of inclusion and exclusion through a pluralism lens--that is, using the Centre's "drivers of pluralism" framework. Some highlights from the full Côte d'Ivoire case are included here.

Livelihoods and Wellbeing

• Ivoirian economic development has relied on liberal economic policies, including acceptance of foreign investment and immigration.

• Under Houphouët-Boigny, economic disparity between the north and south was mitigated by policies that allowed Ivoirians and immigrants to own land and make investments regardless their regional origin. Under Laurent Gbagbo, these disparities became worse since the north was cut off from participation both in government and the southern economy.

Law, Politics and Recognition

• Multi-party politics alone do not equal democracy. As practiced in Côte d'Ivoire, multiparty politics has been exclusionary, with "winner-takes-all" elections producing political marginalization based on ethnic, religious and regional differences.

• The policy of *Ivoirité* introduced in 1994 denied recognition as full citizens to many people from the North. Without recognized citizenship, they encountered blockages to owning land and accessing public employment. The policy also was used to disqualify a prominent candidate from seeking the presidency.

• While the 2007 Ouagadougou Peace Accord provided a temporary power-sharing arrangement, the principle of consociationalism was not maintained after 2010. In the absence of institutional safeguards, contestation of the 2010 election resulted in a second civil war.

Citizens, Civil Society and Identity

• The legacy of French colonialism and Côte d'Ivoire's membership in the Federation of French West Africa until 1958 meant that the Ivoirian population remained deeply intertwined with ethnic and religious groups residing in other French ex-colonies. Fluid economic and labour migration across colonial-era frontiers posed particular challenges in defining Ivoirian citizenship post-independence.

• Côte d'Ivoire's reversal of exclusionary citizenship laws, and its experience of using technology and legal pragmatism to make access to citizenship rights transparent can be instructive to other countries.

CONCLUSION

The Côte d'Ivoire experience offers several lessons. First, leadership matters. During his authoritarian rule, Houphouët-Boigny sought to manage ethnic and regional tensions through inclusive economic policies and by giving access to some political power for representatives of ethnic groups other than his own. In contrast, since 1993 political leaders, especially presidents, consolidated power at the expense of those outside their ethnic group or region, while citizenship law was used to legitimize

practices of economic and political exclusion. Second, Côte d'Ivoire's experience is illustrative of the importance of citizenship and recognition. The denial of citizenship rights to a large number of Ivoirians, particularly from the North, led to a bitter civil war. But creative legal and administrative solutions led to the recognition of the rights of previously excluded people and the establishment of transparent rules for accessing citizenship. Finally, multi-party elections in ethnically divided countries can generate incentives for exclusion. Without institutional mechanisms for ensuring equal treatment and power-sharing, multiparty elections in divided societies can degenerate into protracted violence. The failure to institutionalize some kind of power-sharing mechanism as a check against political marginalization was a lost opportunity after the Peace Accord of 2007.

CASE AUTHOR

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The Global Centre for Pluralism is an applied knowledge organization that facilitates dialogue, analysis and exchange about the building blocks of inclusive societies in which human differences are respected. Based in Ottawa, the Centre is inspired by Canadian pluralism, which demonstrates what governments and citizens can achieve when human diversity is valued and recognized as a foundation for shared citizenship. Please visit us at **pluralism.ca**